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Exploring the Effects of the Human–Animal Relationship on Care-Farms in the Context of Trauma Histories

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the effects of

human-animal relationships on care-farms, with specific attention to the context of trauma histories. We questioned how the interpretative act and belief in identifying shared narratives of prior suffering could change how people relate to their own narratives of trauma and grief and to animals. Drawing on a study of grieving individuals' experiences on a care-farm providing support and psychoeducation to individuals who have experienced traumatic grief, we present the results of an in-depth qualitative survey. As part of the study, participants were asked to reflect on whether it was important that the service-provider's model included helping rescue animals: 91% answered affirmatively. Participants were invited to expand discursively why, or why not, this had been meaningful to them. Our results show that participants assigned benefits from personally identifying a "shared narrative" of trauma with the animals, that witnessing a level of rehabilitation and resilience in animals with trauma histories was meaningful for participants for their own integration of grief, and that being able to contribute "care" for animals provided a mechanism for compassionate practice. Our findings suggest that animals with loss and trauma biographies may provide unique and unexpected psychological benefits to humans facing grief

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and trauma. We are not suggesting that animals who have a traumatic past have an inherent capacity for providing salutary benefit or that such animals should be engaged to provide therapeutic opportunities. Rather, we emphasize the importance of narrative and how such narratives change how participants relate to, and interact with, animals. Our research serves as an important reminder that “therapy animals” are living beings with their own life histories and experiences. Careful thought needs to be given when working with animals in a therapeutic context in order to protect both vulnerable humans and animals.

Q KEYWORDS: [Animal-assisted therapy](#) [care-farming](#) [grief](#)
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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